Heine's illness: the case for multiple sclerosis

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A writer of undoubted genius, Heinrich Heine (1797-1856) died after many years of crippling neurological disease[1-3]. Heine himself, his family, and posterity have blamed his promiscuity, and no less an authority than Macdonald Critchley[4] described him thus in a brilliant paper entitled 'Four illustrious neuroluetics': '. . . the diagnosis in retrospect . . . as definite as can be, short of serological confirmation'. Heine's prolific works and published correspondence fortunately allow a good reconstruction of his medical history.

Heine was born in 1797 in Duesseldorf which was then occupied by the French. He saw Napoleon as a boy, and continued to idolize him all his life. Great German literature had really begun only about 30 years before his birth, with Lessing, the young Goethe, and Schiller, centuries after the first great writers and poets in Italian, French and English.

Heine's was a mainly successful bourgeois family: his two brothers were ennobled by the emperors of Russia and of Austria, his sister married a German aristocrat, and his paternal uncle Solomon, on whom he was to sponge all his life, was an immensely rich international banker in Hamburg. After a dabble in commerce, and bankruptcy, Heine half-heartedly read law at Bonn, Berlin and Goettingen. At Bonn, his early poetry was valued and encouraged by August Schlegel, and at Berlin there was the influence of Hegel. He did not practise law but achieved lasting poetical fame in 1827 with publication of *Das Buch der Lieder*. In the following year Schubert used some of these poems for his own last compositions, and a host of other composers were similarly inspired: Schumann, Mendelssohn, Liszt, Wagner, Brahms, Wolf, Berlioz, Gounod and others. He was also to inspire two of Wagner's operas (*Flying Dutchman* and *Tannhäuser*), Richard Strauss's *Salome* (via Oscar Wilde), ballets by Adam (*Giselle*), and most recently by Werner Egk (*Faust*).

Heine's output of poetry became intermittent after his twenties but he continued as a prolific and rather second-rate prose writer including regular and lucrative journalism. After the July revolution of 1830 he moved permanently to Paris and wrote in French as well as in German. He wrote compulsively, and frequently got himself into trouble, and alienated almost all his friends, except some distant ones. Best described as 'mixed up', in current terms, he was born into an agnostic Jewish family, went to a Catholic school, was baptized by a Lutheran pastor, adopted Saint-Simonism, married in a Catholic church. He was a close friend of Karl Marx during the latter's exile in Paris, and has been made a hero of Marxism-Leninism, with statues in Moscow and Leningrad, for his writings in favour of the workers and against the aristocracy. During the same period he received a regular pension from secret Orléanist funds, and railway shares from the Paris Rothschilds. He was consistently anglophobic[5], detested the Duke of Wellington but worshipped Canning. He bragged of numerous affairs, including the writer George Sand in whose favours he succeeded de Musset, and preceded Chopin[1]. He eventually married an illiterate Paris shop-girl who stuck by him when he became crippled.

In his youth he began to have dreadful headaches which continued to trouble him throughout his life, and were probably migraine: he was quite intolerant of all forms of alcohol. Sea bathing was prescribed and led incidentally to his famous North Sea poems. He travelled to Italy and England, wrote about the number of prostitutes in London in 1826, and may have had some venereal infection: by 1849, when he had become disabled, he wrote to his medical brother Max in St Petersburg about 'one of those private illnesses which Germans suffer who privatise abroad'[6].

At the age of 35 in 1832 (Figure 1) in Paris he developed paralysis of two fingers of the left hand which never recovered. Two years later he suffered a period of depression '. . . une tristesse; je suis devenu tout à fait malade et morose, je ne lis rien, je n'écris rien . . .'[6]. In September 1837 he described visual

HEINRICH HEINE 1831
Portrait by Moritz Oppenheim

Figure 1. Heine, aged 34, in 1831

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failure which progressed over a few hours until the right eye could see nothing, the left only very little. Two weeks later vision had improved, but worsened again in December, and became better once more in the new year. In June 1838 he had three weeks of diplopia, followed by a further period of poor vision at the end of the year.

In a letter of 8 July 1839, 'Depuis dix jours mon mal d'yeux est revenu et de nouveau je souffre des éblouissements qui font vaciller à ma vue les objets, et leur prêtent une couleur moitié grisâtre, moitié argentine'[6] (for 10 days my eye trouble has returned and I suffer giddy turns which make objects vacillate in my sight, and gives them partly a greyish, partly a silvery colour'); an apparent description of oscillopsia, and of the colour vision disorder of optic neuritis. Vision improved when Dr J Sichel applied leeches, only to worsen again in 1841. In 1842 he could see well but had another spell of depression, and a left facial palsy. In early 1843 he had right facial weakness, and on 12 April 1843 he wrote to his medical brother Max about his hemianaesthesia '. . . almost the whole of my left side is paralysed as regards feeling, the mobility of the muscles is still preserved. . . Moreover the left eye is feeble and hurts, does not often agree with the right, and this causes a confusion of sight which is much more intolerable than the darkness of full blindness'[6].

In 1844 there were three further periods of visual failure, and yet another in 1845 when he became paraparetic, and was bed-bound during July. In February 1846 he had another facial palsy, and he blamed the 'échauffement' of the Paris summer for the next set-back which caused bulbar symptoms. He was sent to Barèges in the Pyrenées for spa treatment: despite further deterioration, with incontinence, he continued to write: 'The baths . . . tomb-like and frighteningly dark cells with stone tubs which are too narrow, a sort of provisional coffin, where one practises lying still for one hour a day, a useful preparation for departing this life . . . the curative springs don't flow in adequate quantity . . . fairly tight vats in which a dozen bathe simultaneously in a vertical posture . . . contacts which are rarely pleasurable . . .'[7].

In early 1848, at the time of the Paris revolution, and of the Communist Manifesto by his former friend Marx, he became completely and permanently paraplegic. It was also the year when Charcot became 'interne' at the Salpêtrière where he set about studying the chronic afflictions of the nervous system. Heine remained in bed for the remaining 8 years of his life, or, as he called it, in his mattress grave. By June 1848 the disease had extended to the right hand and arm, and he needed a scribe thereafter. He wrote more and more to his brother Max in St Petersburg for medical help:

September 1848 '. . . my troubles are situated in the spine . . . for 48 h I have been rolling about in the most awful cramps . . . which have now reached the hands . . . which bring about contortions and distortions but there is an absence of acute pain. This living death, this un-life . . . my lips are paralysed like my feet, the tools of eating are also paralysed as well as the channels of excretion. I can neither chew nor shit, and have to be fed like a bird . . .'[6]

December 1848: 'my eyes too have improved . . . the eyes themselves are not affected . . . but closed, and I can only see when I lift the right lid . . . My spirit has become lachrymose which is quite foreign to my nature, and is an eerie phenomenon causing additional anxiety . . .'[6] (Figure 2).

HEINRICH HEINE 1851
Drawing by Ernst Benedict-Kietz

Figure 2. Heine, aged 54, in 1851, three years after onset of paraplegia: apparent ptosis and facial palsy

January 1850: '. . . dreadful cramps . . . lower half of body knotted . . . can only lie on my side . . . constipated 14 days . . . Morphine relieves . . . too much . . . 7 grains in 24 hours . . . I live in a doped wilderness . . . have composed some poetry . . . my head has been made tired and thoughtless by the pain, by the facial and jaw cramps, and by the opiate. I would like a medicament which could replace the morphine for a period.'[6] Inevitably the replies were empty, and Max kept his distance. Heine's literary output continued almost to the end which came from chest complications on 17 February 1856. The most renowned of his penultimate words was the characteristic 'Dieu me pardonnerait: c'est son métier.'

Heine's attitude to illness and death was reasonably detached: the sight of a moribund priest in Lucca in 1830 reminded him that '. . . everybody is sick enough in this lazar-house . . . I happened to witness a repulsive argument in a little hospital in Cracow where it was dreadful to hear the patients riling each other over their ailments, where shrivelled-up consumptives scoffed at others distended with dropsy, who laughed at one with nasal cancer, who in turn mocked the trismus and ocular distortions of his neighbour . . .'[7]. In 1832 he wrote a good account of a cholera epidemic in Paris when he himself nursed his sick cousin. Marx credited him with having saved his daughter's life when he dipped her into a bath to stop some kind of convulsion.

He complied with his own doctors, even when he had no illusions about the value of spa treatment except as respite for the practitioner at home. He was attended by a compatriot, a Dr Leo Wertheim, until Mme Heine boxed his ears for having criticized her care. He was succeeded by Dr David Gruby[8], a Hungarian who had qualified in Vienna and who combined a classy Paris practice with science: he taught histology to the young Claude Bernard among others.

TRAITÉ

DE

L'OPHTHALMIE,

LA

CATARACTE

ET L'AMAUROSE,

POUR SERVIR DE SUPPLÉMENT

AU TRAITÉ DES MALADIES DES YEUX DE WELLER;

PAR

J. SICHEL,

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1837.

Figure 3. Sichel's book of 1827 when Heine first consulted him about failing vision

Apart from purges, leeches and phlebotomies and spa treatments Heine was given huge quantities of opium derivatives for his spasms, 0.42 g per day, at 600 gold francs per annum. It is remarkable that he survived for 8 years after his cord lesion had become complete.

He was not treated by any of the great men of Paris medicine which was then at its apogee, with the one exception of Jules or Julius Sichel[9] who treated his eyes from 1837 on. Sichel was another German immigrant who filled the ophthalmological vacuum in Paris with great success. His *Traité d'Ophthalmie*[10] of 1837 (Figure 3) lists a great number of 'received' conditions, and recognized the connection between some kinds of blindness and spinal cord disease: 'Espèce d'amaurose spinale torpide', and blames prolonged breast-feeding, a nervous constitution, 'déterminé par la débauche et l'onanisme'. His definitive opus *Iconographie Ophthalmologique*[11] reads like a modern text, and was published in the 1850s (Figure 4) after Heine had become paraplegic; it contains hundreds of case histories and superb colour plates, including fundus pictures, as Helmholtz's ophthalmoscopy had just made this possible. An appearance of optic disc atrophy was compatible with recovery of sight, and the 45-year-old patient could have been Heine.

Various diagnoses have been proposed for this illness which extended over 24 years: it started in the left hand in 1832, and was followed by at least 12 separate episodes of remitting visual failure or diplopia between 1837 and 1855, two attacks of depression, brain-stem trouble in 1843, paraparesis in 1845, bulbar symptoms in 1846, and complete paraplegia from 1848 until his death in 1856.

Hereditary diseases, porphyria[12], spinal muscular atrophy (motor neurone disease)[13] do not deserve consideration because of the visual troubles. The combination of cranial nerve and central nervous system features just raises the possibility of sarcoidosis but the visual and spinal cord signs do not fit. Neurosyphilis[4,8,14,15] has, of course, been the favourite diagnosis from the start, in particular a combination of tabes dorsalis and meningo-vascular lues. Severe ptosis certainly occurs in tabes (Figure 5)

ICONOGRAPHIE

OPHTHALMOLOGIQUE

OU

DESCRIPTION, AVEC FIGURES COLORIÉES,

DES MALADIES DE L'ORGANE DE LA VUE.

COMPRENANT

L'ANATOMIE PATHOLOGIQUE,

LA PATHOLOGIE ET LA THÉRAPEUTIQUE MÉDICO-CHIRURGICALES,

PAR

J. SICHEL,

TEXTE

Accompagné d'un Atlas de LXXX planches dessinées d'après nature, gravées et coloriées.

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1852—1859

Figure 4. Sichel's magnum opus of 1852-1859, an ophthalmological 'classic', with colour illustrations

Figure 5. Gowers' drawing of ptosis in one of Charcot's patients with tabes dorsalis

but the visual failure of tabes is quite irreversible[16], even with modern treatment. Likewise, when syphilitic arteritis causes a stroke there is no recovery.

Surely the dissemination of lesions in time and in space (optic nerves, brain-stem and cord) makes multiple sclerosis (MS) much the likeliest cause. This was mooted by Schachter in 1933[17], mentioned by Putnam[18], and dismissed by Critchley[4]. The probable earlier venereal infection seems irrelevant, even if it was syphilitic, as only a minority of people with a positive WR developed neurosyphilis, that is, quite different clinical states. Slightly unusual features in MS are repeated cranial nerve palsies, but isolated 5th, 7th and 8th cranial nerve symptoms are well known to occur in MS. Ptosis is very rare: I have dealt with one proven case who required an operation to elevate the lid, and there has been a recent postmortem study[19] of a girl who had severe ptosis from brain-stem demyelination. The most astonishing fact is the excellence of Heine's late poetry, agreed by eminent literary critics[1,20], at a time when he had advanced disease, and had been doped with morphine for years.

Heine's illness started a few years before the first descriptions of the lesions of MS by Carswell and Cruveilhier in 1838/41[18,21,22]. The classical accounts of the clinical features by Charcot[23] followed his death. The first record by a patient was in the diary of Augustus D'Este[24], a son of Augustus, Duke of Sussex, and of Lady Augusta Murray (whose marriage was not validated by King George III), and who was a first cousin of Queen Victoria. Born in 1794, he served in the Army and first had visual symptoms in 1822. His last years were spent in a wheelchair. He died in 1848, 8 years before Heine, 26 years after the presumed onset. His pathetic story is made worse by the seeming lack of intellectual outlets. At least Heine remained creative almost to the end. He is the second recorded, and certainly the most eminent, victim of multiple sclerosis.

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